

AIR WAR COLLEGE

AIR UNIVERSITY

FROM RECRUITING SLOGAN TO AIR FORCE MOTTO:

THE EVOLUTION OF
“AIM HIGH...FLY, FIGHT, WIN!”

By

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Biography

Colonel Matthew J. Lloyd is currently a student in the Air War College Class of 2011. He earned his commission from the United States Air Force Academy, graduating with a BS in Aeronautical Engineering in 1989. He also earned a MAS from Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University, a MA from the Air Command and Staff College and was a Distinguished Graduate of Squadron Officer School. Col Lloyd is a command pilot with nearly 3800 hours in the KC-135, T-38, T-37, C-141, and KC-10. He has served as an Undergraduate Pilot Training Instructor Pilot, an ACSC Instructor and Commander of the 9th Air Refueling Squadron and 908th Expeditionary Air Refueling Squadron. Prior to attending AWC, Col Lloyd was Deputy Commander of the 60th Operations Group.

Introduction

On October 8th of this year, the Air Force announced the selection of its new motto: “Aim High...Fly, Fight, Win.”¹ This completed several months of research to find a service unifying rallying cry similar to the Marine Corps’ “Semper Fidelis.” This announcement came on the heels of terminating the Air Force’s “Above All” recruiting campaign. “Above All” was seen by many as not just a recruiting pitch but the Air Force motto as well. The line between a motto and a recruiting slogan can be very thin. “Semper Fidelis” is the official Marine Corps motto. However, to many the recruiting slogan “The Few, The Proud, The Marines” serves just as well. The Air Force used five different recruiting slogans from 2000 to 2010 and found the slogans communicated not just to potential recruits but also spoke to the American public, sister services, Congress, and current serving members of the Air Force. Many of those groups saw each successive recruiting slogan as a new Air Force motto. So is there a difference? Both can convey the culture and identity of the Air Force. Both can serve as a rallying cry. Does a recruiting slogan serve a distinctly different purpose than a dedicated service motto? Air Force Chief of Staff General Norton A. Schwartz recently stated: “A service motto belongs to those who serve.”² Recruiting campaigns may need to change periodically to keep the service current in the eyes of recruits as well as focusing on the opportunities the Air Force presents. The associated slogans may even attempt to convey what it means to be an airman and the values we hold. The service motto needs to carry an enduring, unifying concept capturing the essence of the Air Force mission all current and former members can embrace. It also needs to send that same message to our sister service partners and the American public we serve.

Slogans

A slogan “is a short phrase used to help establish an image, identity, or position for an organization to increase memorability.”³ This is certainly what the Air Force has intended with its recruiting campaign slogans. “Aim High,” “No One Comes Close,” “Cross into the Blue,” “Do Something Amazing,” and finally “Above All” have all served as the centerpiece of Air Force advertising and recruiting campaigns, attempting to promote the service as elite and desirable. These slogans also attempted to establish in the minds of recruits the Air Force’s culture, identity, and purpose: an elite cadre of highly successful professionals on the leading edge of technology delivering military power anywhere on the planet. A good slogan may “become an integral part of a brand’s image and personality”⁴ and “act as shorthand identification for the brand.”⁵ Such is the case for the Marine’s “The Few, The Proud.” Arguably, only “Aim High,” the longest serving⁶ of the Air Force slogans, met those criteria and is remembered in the same fashion. “Many Americans still think that slogan represents the Air Force.”⁷ As stated before, previous slogans were tied to recruiting campaigns. Was the intent to be “shorthand” for the Air Force, a catchy phrase to attract the attention of potential recruits, or serve as a defining statement for what the service is?

These campaigns and their associated slogans were not solely directed at the young men and women the Air Force wished to recruit. In 2000, “enhancing public understanding of the Air Force’s contribution to the nation” was a main objective for what eventually became the “No One Comes Close” campaign.⁸ The idea behind the 2006 “Do Something Amazing” campaign was showing the American people what Air Force personnel were doing every day around the world.⁹ The 2008 “Above All” campaign also had reaching the public as an objective. “Our research found the American public doesn’t understand the Air Force—who we are, what we do,

why we do it—as well we believe we should,” an Air Force spokesman stated at the time of that campaign’s unveiling.¹⁰ A major Air Force goal for the campaign was “to remind the public of the service’s contributions in the War on Terror and to the country’s protection in general.”¹¹ A consistent theme throughout all of the campaigns is the Air Force wishing to convey its purpose to the taxpayers who fund it. It was hoped these slogans would inspire the public’s confidence in its Air Force as well as increase the general understanding of its mission and place in the defense of the nation.

If these campaigns and their slogans have an intended audience beyond recruiting, do they also speak to (and for) those who have served and currently serve in the Air Force? Several campaigns, such as “Cross into the Blue,” “Do Something Amazing,” and “Above All” featured active duty service members in the advertising, directly linking Air Force personnel to the slogans. These slogans may have captured or presented the service identity but they did not become the service motto. These recruiting slogans did not truly speak to a heritage or shared values but focused on the opportunities awaiting potential new members. Another challenge in turning these slogans into widely accepted mottos is finding a concept which unifies the many diverse Air Force missions. Air Force Secretary James Roche noted this while unveiling the “Cross into the Blue” campaign: “When you say Air Force, people naturally think of planes and pilots; however, the variety of Air Force specialties is broad and rich with opportunity, ranging from flying sophisticated satellites to putting up portable hospitals.”¹² “Cross into the Blue” may have conveyed a general concept of opportunity and adventure to recruits; it would not be a service wide rallying cry like to “Semper Fi.” When the “Above All” campaign was launched, some serving airmen said “it delivers a strong message that we’re the best at what we do.”¹³ Again, an outwardly focused message, but not quite a rallying cry. One recruiting slogan

however, “No One Comes Close,” was directed inward. Air Force Chief of Staff General Michael Ryan stated: “Our recruiting problem begins with a retention problem.”¹⁴ While hoping to inspire recruits, this campaign also hoped to inspire currently serving airmen. Making them proud of the Air Force and what they do for it, and then hopefully reenlist was a main goal. A fine objective, but as a motto “No One Comes Close” did not have staying power or become accepted throughout the service.

“Aim High”

One slogan with staying power was the one in use at the opening of the decade: “Aim High.” In 1984, it replaced “A Great Way of Life” which had been in use since the late 70’s.¹⁵ “Aim High” was prominently featured in recruiting advertising and literature throughout the period of its use, and logos also were featured on official Air Force memorandums and stationary. “Aim High” became well associated with the Air Force, possibly from the longevity of its use but also because of its simple and easily understood message. Long after its replacement as the central Air Force recruiting slogan, many Americans still considered it the Air Force motto in 2008. Recently, General Gary North stated “It represents what all airmen should strive toward.”¹⁶ However, by 2000 Air Force leadership thought “Aim High” was “not cutting it anymore.”¹⁷ A new image and slogan was desired to “excite the public, while helping airmen understand that they all play an important part in the Air Force.”¹⁸

“No One Comes Close”

The first proposed replacement was “World Ready,” but was rejected after a weak response from the service’s four-star generals.¹⁹ The slogan that did make the cut: “No One Comes Close.” The full slogan, “America’s Air Force—No One Comes Close,” was announced in September of 2000.²⁰ Brigadier General Ron Rand, Director of Air Force Public Affairs said

“‘No One Comes Close’ really describes our Air Force.” Not all fully supported changing the Air Force image. Retired General Mike Loh questioned the need in January of 2000 saying “the Air Force doesn’t have an identity crisis” and expressed skepticism at efforts to push a new slogan and identity to airmen from the top down: “This can’t be directed, it can’t be shoved down their throats.”²¹ The Air Force was looking to unify those currently in uniform, particularly to head off recruiting issues by increasing retention. It wished to inspire those serving by making them understand they were part of an enterprise bigger than themselves. Feedback from the field had some commanders saying they were challenged by “troops that didn’t get in for the right reasons” like bonuses.²² Air Force Secretary Whit Peters also looked to the campaign and its slogan as a way to make the American people understand the wide ranging and high tech Air Force mission.²³ But “No One Comes Close” as a slogan also can convey an attitude of superiority. The audience for any slogan and recruiting campaign isn’t just limited to its intended targets. “No One Comes Close” reached beyond current airmen, the American public and potential recruits as well. Retired General Charles Krulak, former Marine Corps Commandant, took exception one possible implication stating “I’m sure there are pilots in all the other services who don’t feel as if they are second to those in the Air Force.”²⁴ While not impossible to see how this slogan was interpreted this way, this was not the intent. Secretary Peters responded “the slogan compares the Air Force to other air forces, not to the Army, the Navy—or the Marines” and Chief of Staff Michael Ryan agreed: “‘No One Comes Close’ means no other Air Force in the world can do what this Air Force does.”²⁵ This foreshadowed similar sister service objections to future slogan “Above All.”

“Cross into the Blue”

In November of 2001, just over a year after introducing “No One Comes Close,” the Air Force announced a new campaign with the slogan “Cross into the Blue.”²⁶ The previous slogan was part of an Air Force rebranding campaign attempting to unify and present an image to a wide audience of potential recruits, the American public in general, and those serving in the Air Force. This campaign was more closely targeted at recruiting. The previous campaign introduced a new Air Force logo and focused related advertising on service members performing their varied missions in a highly dedicated and professional manner. “Cross into the Blue” focused on the unique opportunities available to someone considering the Air Force as a career. General John Jumper, Air Force Chief of Staff, said “Our new campaign shows a number of specialties the public might not be aware of; it invites young men and women to join us in our very important mission.”²⁷ Further accentuating the recruiting focus was a concurrent campaign featuring the slogan “We’ve Been Waiting for You.”²⁸ A slogan primarily directed at recruiting, “Cross into the Blue” did not reach acceptance as a broader Air Force motto. While presenting an interesting concept of what joining the Air Force could mean, and possibly creating a common “Blue” identity, it didn’t really speak to Air Force heritage or its core values of “Integrity First, Service before Self, and Excellence in All We Do.”²⁹

“Do Something Amazing”

On the 59th Anniversary of its establishment as a separate service, the Air Force launched another new recruiting campaign with the slogan “Do Something Amazing.”³⁰ As with “Cross into the Blue,” this campaign focused on recruiting. The Deputy Chief of Strategic Communications for the Air Force Recruiting Service said “‘Do Something Amazing’ was not to replace “Cross into the Blue” but complement it.”³¹ The campaign did take a different approach

by using actual airman rather than professional actors. Television commercials were shot at Air Force bases throughout the world in a documentary style, with airmen interviewed about their day-to-day jobs. “We felt we could do something a little better to showcase things out airmen do every day,” explained Col Brian Madtes, Recruiting Service Strategic Communication Division Chief.³² Career fields chosen for the ads represented Air Force vacancies and hard to fill jobs as opposed to fields possibly more suited to displaying Air Force wartime contributions. Despite using active duty airmen, “Do Something Amazing” wasn’t accepted or seen as an Air Force motto. Clearly, the advertising and slogan were directed at convincing potential recruits to join the Air Force by presenting the opportunities an Air Force career could offer. Like “Cross into the Blue,” “Do Something Amazing” did not offer much insight into the Air Force mission, heritage, or core values. It focused on the individual and what benefits they could gain by joining the Air Force. However, as is often the case with any recruiting campaign, this became the main vehicle by which the American public derived its image of its Air Force. The US, during the “Cross into the Blue and “Do Something Amazing” period, was still engaged in major combat operations in Iraq (as it had since 2003) and Afghanistan (as it had since 2001). Despite full Air Force participation in both campaigns, the general public perception was these were primarily ground wars fought by the Army and Marine Corps. A recruiting focused advertising campaign promoting the unique career opportunities was doing little to counter that perception.

“Above All”

In February of 2008 the Air Force, similar to its 2000 rebranding attempt put forth a new campaign centered with the slogan “Above All.”³³ Rebranding was the direction given to Colonel Michael Caldwell, Air Force Deputy Director of Public Affairs. According to Caldwell, “Despite the success of the ‘Do Something Amazing’ campaign with respect to recruiting,

leadership thought the US is not recognizing the Air Force contribution in Operations Enduring and Iraqi Freedom and we need to showcase ourselves to show our warfighting role.”³⁴ In its 2009 budget request, the Air Force stated the campaign objective was “to change a mind-set by educating the American public on how today’s Air Force is the most engaged, versatile and high-tech of all military services.”³⁵ This was still to be a recruiting campaign and that led the generation of the “Above All” slogan. Colonel Caldwell, detailed extensive research showing the eligible pool of potential recruits had shrunk considerably and an even smaller number from that pool predisposed to serve.³⁶ The majority of those potential recruits’ main “influencers” (parents, coaches, clergy, or teachers) had not served in the armed forces nor showed a propensity to recommend such a career to those they influenced.³⁷ Both groups were the people this new campaign was to reach. Although the Air Force was currently meeting its recruiting goals, hopefully this campaign would hopefully create a favorable long term image in the minds of potential ‘influencers’ and help maintain recruiting success.³⁸ As Colonel Caldwell described the process, he pointed out marketing research showed “The American people think the Air Force is the most technological, smartest, and probably most critical to the next conflict.”³⁹ The challenge was selecting a slogan which resonated with potential recruits and their ‘influencers;’ maintaining that already held image while portraying the current Air Force contribution to the war effort. The selection of “Above All” came at the end of an extensive research process, and was chosen by Caldwell’s team from over 50 others presented by the Air Force’s contracted advertising firm.⁴⁰ Caldwell thought it successfully conveyed “Where we operate is the ultimate high ground and that our ultimate mission is to defend America.”⁴¹ At the time of its release, Caldwell stated “The new slogan is admittedly a bold one, but so are airmen. This campaign accurately portrays airmen and how they are executing the Air Force mission to ensure the

security and safety of America now and in the future.”⁴² The boldness of the slogan would be a point of discussion among a broader audience than the one the campaign was intended to reach. As previously discussed, the pool of qualified and interested potential recruits is not large. The other services are looking at the same pool, as were many other employers during then booming economic times. Colonel Caldwell pointed out the campaign needed to be bold in order to separate the Air Force from the pack and appeal to highly capable, highly achieving recruits.⁴³ And, according to Caldwell, research showed “Above All” did resonate. He stated “Above All” did so with potential recruits over and above all previous slogans, including “Aim High” which no previous slogan had ever done.⁴⁴ It also came in second, to “Aim High,” among the “influencers.”⁴⁵ “Above All” proved to resonate well beyond recruiting.

In 2008, *Adweek* described the “Above All” campaign as “stressing the technological cutting edge of national defense, taking an oblique approach to recruiting.”⁴⁶ This oblique approach led some to question the true intent of the “Above All” campaign. US Representative Allen Boyd said the ads “appeared to be the kids of ads that an advocacy group would run,” basically accusing the Air Force of attempting to illegally lobby Congress.⁴⁷ The late Representative John Murtha shared that sentiment as well.⁴⁸ A senior Pentagon official was quoted as saying “It doesn’t look like a recruiting ad; the Air Force does appear to be pushing the envelope.”⁴⁹ Air Force Secretary Michael Wynne and Chief of Staff General T. Michael Moseley both denied any agenda broader than recruiting for “Above All” and its associated advertising.⁵⁰ Despite the rebuttal, the campaign and its slogan were seen as much more. The New York Times reported “across the Pentagon, the new motto was seen as boasting of a different kind of exceptionalism, one that put the Air Force above the rest of the military.”⁵¹ Many outside the Air Force saw “Above All” as its motto, despite the fact its creators were not

directed, nor was the intention, to make it the service's version of 'Semper Fi.' Some inside the Air Force saw it that way as well. CMSgt Michael Williams wrote "of all the previous slogans, this new slogan encapsulates what we do and who we are: American airmen whose mission is to fly, fight and win in air, space, and cyberspace."⁵² So was 'Above All' just about recruiting or was it destined carry a larger message to a much wider audience? When the campaign launched, the officer who led the effort said: "'Above All' is about what we do and how we do it. The job of the Air Force is to defend America and we do that by dominating air, space, and cyberspace. The new campaign and slogan captures our roots, but also illustrates where we're going as a service as the Air Force prepares to contend with future threats. It captures the professionalism of our airmen, our technological edge and our ability to meet today's threats while at the same time prepare for future challenges. When anyone in our Air Force family sees an 'Above All' ad, we hope it reminds them their role in America. This campaign makes it clear the Air Force's mission 'Above All' is national defense and protecting the American people."⁵³ It is not hard to see how anyone might assess "Above All" as a motto and not just a recruiting pitch.

The Search for a Motto

In the spring of 2010, Air Force leadership stopped the use of "Above All" as a recruiting slogan. They also undertook the process of developing an official Air Force motto. So far, this paper has focused on the Air Force recruiting slogans used this decade. They were at the center of recruiting campaigns and sometimes used to rebrand the service. None were intended as the service motto, despite what some in Congress, other services, or even the Air Force may have thought. Since its establishment as a separate service, the Air Force has not had an official motto. There wasn't one during its previous incarnations as the Army Air Service, Army Air Corps, or Army Air Forces. So why create one now? It could be argued developing an official

motto is an attempt to erase the perception of “Above All” as the motto and distance the Air Force from any negative connotations that phrase had. It could also be argued after a decade of appearing to search for an identity through its recruiting campaigns the time was right to establish exactly what the Air Force identity should be.

In an interview, Lt Col Clark Groves, the officer charged by senior Air Force leaders with researching and developing a motto, offered this opinion of why now. The Air Force has navigated through a period of turbulence which saw its top leadership replaced and is now at a point where it is no longer fixing problems but maintaining the fixes which were put in; developing an enduring motto would be a positive, proactive thing which could build esprit de corps.⁵⁴ That is exactly what he was directed to do. It was “intentionally to be something different” from a recruiting slogan: “Find the Semper Fi for the Air Force.”⁵⁵ “People may recall slogans seen in ad campaigns supporting recruiting efforts, the Air Force motto is meant to endure for future generations of airmen”⁵⁶ Groves stated in an August press release. A motto is defined as “a short expression of a guiding principle,”⁵⁷ or “a brief statement used to express a principle, goal, or ideal.”⁵⁸ The search for the principle, “What is means to be an airman,” is what drove Grove’s research.⁵⁹ “To be enduring, the motto must represent the essence of the Air Force culture,”⁶⁰ Groves has stated. “It must capture the airman’s sense of what it means to be a part of that culture, a sense of their Air Force identity.”⁶¹

Groves conducted extensive research throughout the Air Force, employing scientific methods, across all career fields, ranks and major commands.⁶² He found Air Force members basically saw five core elements of airman identity: “Guardians of new security domains, Win against complex threats, Empowered thinkers, Innovation for national defense, Excellence, and Proud of the uniqueness of Air Force military service.”⁶³ According to Groves, as motto

candidates were developed they were evaluated against these elements to ensure it fit.⁶⁴ Groves stated Air Force leadership truly wanted to take time to ask airmen what they thought and develop a studied and proven motto, not relying on anecdotal evidence.⁶⁵ “You can’t impose an identity,”⁶⁶ Groves stated. Colonel Les Kodlick, Air Force Director of Public Affairs confirmed the Air Force would not force a motto on airmen following the extensive process.⁶⁷

“Aim High...Fly, Fight, Win”

After months of research, the Air Force settled on “Aim High...Fly, Fight, Win.” “Slogans and ad phrases come and go, but a motto is meant to be passed from one generation of airmen to another, this is for the hundreds and thousands of airmen who now serve, who have served, and who will serve in the future,” said Chief Master Sergeant of the Air Force James Roy.⁶⁸ Col Kodlick called it “the first choice of airmen.”⁶⁹ Ironically, the first part of the new motto is one of the most famous and well recognized Air Force recruiting slogans. “Aim High” was used for over a decade prior to it being phased out in 2000. “Aim High” is well recognized and has compared favorably against other slogans used since its replacement. “Fly, Fight, and Win” has been an unofficial motto for some time. General Schwartz used the phrase as the title of his September 2008 CSAF Vector⁷⁰ and the phrase frequently has appeared in articles written by Air Force leaders at all levels, for example one entitled “Ready to Fly, Fight, Win” authored by a Group Commander in Guam.⁷¹ The Air Force, on its website, states “the mission of the United States Air Force is to fly, fight, and win...in air, space, and cyberspace.”⁷² By pairing its most popular and resilient recruiting slogan with its short and snappy mission statement the Air Force may have found a phrase which speaks to and for its members about what it means to be an airman. The Chief of Staff certainly thinks so stating ‘I’m satisfied we settled on a motto that will be accepted by today’s airmen, and endure for years to come.’⁷³

Lt Col Larry Smith noted in his 1998 article on Air Force culture and cohesion Air Force Secretary Donald Rice felt “Officers identified with their weapon systems, not with the Air Force.”⁷⁴ Smith wrote “by the late 1980s, primary Air Force internal divisions reflected a technological bent, creating splits between pilots and all other airman and between the types of systems pilots flew.”⁷⁵ These divisions exist today and the issue has not faded with time. The divisions are wider than just different aircraft. Space, cyber, security forces, civil engineering, or medical professionals are just a few examples of career fields which may not feel a common identity. Colonel Michael Caldwell, architect of the “Above All” campaign, related some senior Air Force Leadership thought in 2008 the lack of a single service identity was a bad thing and wanted to address it, possibly though the subsequent recruiting campaign.⁷⁶ Can the new Air Force motto aid in creating a shared identity. General Stephen Lorenz, in the announcement release said “The exhaustive research process showed airmen share a core set of identity concepts that serve as a basis for an Air Force motto.”⁷⁷ He continued by saying “No matter what career field they serve in, airmen consistently told us they see themselves, and they see the heritage of the Air Force, as those entrusted by the nation to defend the modern, complex security domains—first air, then space and now cyberspace.”⁷⁸ “Aim High...Fly, Fight, and Win” may very well be able to do just that. It certainly fits the dictionary definition of a motto. It conveys a fairly simple statement expressing the Air Force’s guiding principle or goal: fighting and winning. “Aim High” can be interpreted as encompassing all three Air Force core values of integrity, service and excellence. It implies doing one’s best, setting and then meeting a high standard. “Fly, Fight, and Win” also carries with it enough for all Air Force members to find common ground. While all may not fly, many serve in specialties which directly support flight operations. Leadership at all levels has, and continues, to put forth a message of how each

airman contributes to a successful mission. As the idea of what constitutes a flight continues to evolve with the increased use of space systems and unmanned aerial vehicles, this will continue to apply. The current Air Force expeditionary culture puts the vast majority of airman in the deployed environment, making “Fight” particularly relevant. It should be obvious all Air Force members want to “Win.” “Aim High...Fly, Fight, and Win” appears to be broad enough to encompass all airman and their myriad missions. By marrying these two popular phrases, the new motto’s chance for adoption by airmen seems high.

Conclusion

This paper initially put forward the idea a service motto must carry an enduring, unifying concept capturing the essence of the Air Force mission all current and former members can embrace. It also should send as that same message to our sister services and the American public we serve. Lt Col Groves stated the final candidates were evaluated against five credibility factors: Enduring, Unifying, Captures Unique Core identity, Inspiring, and Good Spoken Quality.⁷⁹ “Aim High...Fly, Fight, and Win” would appear to meet all five criteria. This new motto does send a clear and easily understood message about who we are and why the Air Force exists. We are determined to be the best. We will dominate the fight in the air, space and cyber medium and achieve victory for our nation. It will send this message and affirm the high regard in which the service is held. Will it be embraced by the airmen and become a part of the Air Force culture? When asked this question, Lt Col Groves compared the selection to planting an acorn. “Come back in 50 years to see if it has grown into an oak tree.”⁸⁰ He pointed out the Air Force Song was written in 1947, but was not officially acknowledged and accepted as such until 1975 by Chief of Staff General Lew Allen.⁸¹ This new motto may not find widespread acceptance and use immediately, despite the support research says it has. However, as each

succeeding basic training or officer training class learns it, as every official ceremony incorporates it, and it eventually becomes a part of the Air Force culture the service will find “Aim High...Fly, Fight, Win” is, as Lt Col Groves was tasked to find, a motto “good enough to engrave in granite.”⁸²



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End Notes

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